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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, teachers of writing have considered it their challenge to prepare students for the workplace. But in growing numbers, students are entering classrooms from the workplace. New trends in the way Americans define themselves as workers and life-long learners call for a redefinition of the role of writing in the academic world. Some creative solutions can help teachers address the sensitive issues of writing anxiety in returning adult students, who are confident on the job but uneasy with academic writing after being away from the classroom setting for a number of years. Being overwhelmed with first writing assignments is common to all students, but because they feel isolated, returning students may not realize this. A solution is to create a Saturday afternoon student forum where they may talk with other students as well as with administration and faculty. Another example is the creation of a writing center as a permanent place offering ongoing help on an individualized basis for adult students. Paths for dialogue among faculty of all disciplines should be explored to face the challenge of the shared issue of teaching the returning student. (CR)

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Teaching Writing to Adults: Examining Assumptions and Revising Expectations for Adult Learners in the Writing Class

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Traditionally, teachers of writing have considered it their challenge to prepare students *for* the workplace. But in growing numbers, students are entering our classrooms *from* the workplace. Changing demographics in the student population in colleges and universities around the country reflect the growing segment of a new kind of non-traditional learner—older, more experienced in the workplace, and convinced that job dissatisfaction, burnout, or corporate downsizing will make the skills of life-long learning something valuable and worth acquiring. Are we prepared, as teachers of writing, to address the writing needs and the writing anxieties of this new kind of non-traditional student? This article explores some of the issues and challenges that emerge when we help adult learners make the transition from the workplace into the classroom.

We are told by career consultants that most individuals can expect to change professions three times in their working lives. We can expect, then, that individuals will be returning to the academic setting, not only for classes that may open up new career paths, but also for the kinds of intellectual challenges that will keep them competitive and creative on the job front. How does the teacher of writing fit into this changing scene? New trends in the way Americans define themselves as workers and life-long learners call for a re-definition of the way in which we understand the role of writing in the academic world.

My own experience as a teacher of writing has forced me to reexamine the traditional model of the freshman composition course as the all-important foundation for students' futures as writers and communicators on the job. For twelve years as a teacher of freshman composition, I held the assumption that if I performed my job well, when these students later graduated and entered the workforce, they would take with them the skills and confidence they needed to be successful writers on the job, and if they chose to return to the academic setting after a hiatus of a few years or more, they would feel at ease as writers once again in the classroom. However, my recent experience has led me to question the validity of this assumption. No longer a teacher of freshman writing, I now work as an administrator and teacher in an interdisciplinary graduate program whose student population is made up entirely of returning adults. My challenge is a new one—how to address the sensitive issues of writing anxiety in returning adult students who are confident and successful in the workplace, but uneasy and often underprepared as writers in the classroom.

Here are three case studies that will illustrate the kinds of writing anxiety that adult learners often bring with them when they reenter the academic world. Each of these adult learners experienced confidence as writers on the job, but felt uneasy when faced with academic writing after being away from the classroom setting for number of years. The amount of time away from the academic world varies among the three—the first student had a four-year hiatus between earning her bachelor's degree and returning to school; the second student had been away from the academic world for seven years; and the third adult learner had not been in an academic setting for thirty-two years. There are common threads among the three. Their honest and open assessment of their own struggles have helped me reexamine my assumptions about adult learners as writers. I have had to reassess how support services such as the Writing Center might better address the needs of these non-traditional students. And I have developed some creative solutions for meeting the writing needs of these adult learners. These steps have included setting aside a time and place where the adult students can freely discuss their concerns, especially those connected with writing, and finding ways to involve interdisciplinary faculty in discussion and dialogue about writing and the role of writing in the classes they teach.

Writing Anxiety—Does It Ever Disappear?

Maria works as a systems analyst for a major oil corporation. In her role as provider of technical support for the company's shareholder system, she produces a great deal of writing on the job—documents that explain software to clients and vendors, correspondence with these clients and vendors, as well as documents that present instructions. This writing has to be clear and precise. In Maria's own words, she feels "very confident on the job as writer." It would be no exaggeration to say that Maria is extremely successful in her career.

Having been away from school for four years and having earned her bachelor's degree in mathematics, with a minor in computer science, Maria decided that she wanted to return to school, not for more technical courses or an MBA, but to find once again the kinds of intellectual challenges she had enjoyed in her humanities classes as an undergraduate. She "loved to learn," as she puts it, and she "wanted to be challenged." However, upon beginning her first class in an interdisciplinary liberal studies graduate program, Maria felt "completely overwhelmed" when her first paper assignment was presented to her. She remembers that during that class session, she felt a sense of panic and said to herself, "What have I gotten myself into? I'd better get out now." The paper requirement was a 15-page research assignment, based on a topic of the student's choice, in the subject area of urban history or issues connected with modern city living. Having lived in the city of

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Chicago all of her life, Maria knew that she had many resources to draw upon, but she felt utterly inadequate as a writer to meet the task. Why was this academic writing so different from the kind of written communication she daily produced at work? In her own words, she explained, "In my job, the materials I work with are clear-cut. There are no grey areas. But in this class, I was told that my paper had to develop an opinion. I had to have my own point of view. I was absolutely overwhelmed by this. This seemed to be such a grey area." Yet, as an undergraduate, Maria took Freshman Composition where she wrote argumentative papers as well as research papers. And still, she felt underprepared as a returning adult student, when asked to write a paper that called for research as well as her own opinion. With an undergraduate grade point average of 3.96, Maria had been a successful writer in the undergraduate classroom. But after just a few sessions in her first class as a returning adult student, Maria was ready to quit.

Finding again that misery loves company

Surprisingly, what kept her from giving up was the discovery that other students in her class felt as nervous and apprehensive as she did about their paper assignment. Here's how she discovered that she was not alone in her writing anxiety: "It was during our fifteen-minute break in this three-hour class that I was chatting in the hallway with several other students, and I found out that I wasn't the only one who felt so unsure of myself. They were just as worried as I was about the upcoming paper." It amazed me to learn that this single incident was a turning point for Maria. This sense of shared writing anxiety was what convinced Maria not to give up. Maria telephoned me shortly after this "Saved by the Coffee break" incident. She had heard an announcement in class that any students who were concerned about their writing should contact me. I had just recently joined this graduate program as its assistant director, leaving behind me the days of teaching freshman composition. Because of my background as teacher of writing, I had quickly been "appointed" (unofficially, of course) as the person to turn to if these adult students needed help with their writing. I thought I had left behind the days when students would come to see me in a state of anxiety over their papers. Maria's phone call was just one of a series of eye-opening experiences for me. I soon learned that many of these returning adult students, though successful and confident in their careers and adept in writing on the job, struggled with anxiety over writing papers just as their younger counterparts, the more traditional age freshmen, often did.

But there are factors that intensify the writing anxiety of the returning adults. Isolation is a major factor. Rushing from their jobs to campus for evening class, they literally race from the workplace into the classroom. Where is the time to talk with other adult learners like themselves? That fifteen-minute coffee break in the middle of a three-hour evening class is typically the only time they have to talk with one another. As Maria explained, this short coffee break was what saved her. It wasn't the caffeine. It was the commaraderie, the sense that she was listened to and understood by others who shared the same concerns. "I wish that we could have a chance to talk with one another more," she told me. "I think we would all feel less isolated."

Maria was voicing a need that often goes unmet for adult learners. They need a place, a time, outside of the classroom, where they can talk, share experiences, and even share anxieties and

concerns. Out of this conversation grew an idea for a creative solution to the problem. We invited all students to attend a Saturday afternoon "Student Forum" where they could not only talk with one another, but also make their voices heard to the director and assistant director of the program who function both as administrators and faculty in the program.

On that Saturday afternoon, I heard students' comments and concerns on a variety of topics, but the dominant issue, the one that kept coming up again and again for discussion, was writing and the anxieties students felt when working on their papers. A significant number of students came up to me after the Forum to say how much better they felt by simply knowing that they weren't alone in feeling uncertain about themselves as writers in the classroom.

On the surface, these adult learners appear to be confident. And in class discussions, their maturity and powers of penetrating analysis are evident. But when faced with writing papers, they seem very much like the freshmen many of us are so familiar with — unsure of themselves as writers, worried about what "academic style" is all about, and afraid to reveal their anxieties about writing because they fear they are the only ones who feel this way.

The Writing Center and non-traditional adult students

This second example illustrates some important ways in which the Writing Center can help address the writing needs of non-traditional adult students. Student Forums can help adults feel that their voices are heard and that their struggles with writing are not so unusual, but this kind of out-of-the classroom event on a Saturday afternoon necessarily is limited in its ability to address in a direct way the particular needs of individual students. The Writing Center is a permanent place that can offer on-going help on an individualized basis for adult students.

But do adult learners make use of the Writing Center? I have found that, in general, adult learners are very reluctant to even consider the Writing Center as a resource. There are several reasons why — first,these adult learners attend evening classes after work and assume that the Writing Center serves only daytime students. Along with this assumption, they also take it for granted that the Writing Center provide service to undergraduates only. Secondly,

the Writing Center is typically seen as the place where students go for remedial writing assistance. The familiar stereotype of the Writing Center as the place where one is sent as a last resort, almost in a punitive way, still is the predominant view.

What I present here is far from a typical situation—Jane's story demonstrates how the Writing Center can be an invaluable resource for an adult learner who is highly motivated to seek assistance outside the classroom in improving writing style. Jane found the Center's writing consultants to be extremely helpful. But this is only part of the story. After receiving such valuable assistance at the Writing Center, she volunteered her time to make a presentation to students who were being trained to become writing consultants in a graduate English course, 'Writing Center Theory and Pedagogy.'

Seeking help from the Writing Center

Like Maria, Jane felt anxious about the research paper assignment in her first class as a returning adult. Jane set aside her lunch hour time from work and came to campus to make use of the Writing Center, and she was surprised to discover that the Writing Center had evening and Saturday hours. Gaining access to this resource, then, was not a problem.

Jane explained to me that she didn't remember doing much research as an undergraduate student and that her clearest memory of writing a research paper stretched back to her high school days. It had been seven years since Jane had earned her undergraduate degree in Secondary Education, and although she had chosen not to pursue a teaching career after graduation, her job experience included quite a bit of writing responsibilities. When she returned to graduate study, she was employed as a medical library assistant in a major urban hospital. Her work-related writing experience included report writing, handling correspondence with clients, and creating promotional material for special events. Her own love of creative writing had prompted her to enroll in several fiction-writing workshops since earning her bachelor's degree. Certainly, it seems as if this kind of background would give her confidence as a writer. But, as she explained, all the writing she had done "did not translate into the classroom." What made her on-the-job writing so different? She told me, "In my work settings, I had very different purposes for writing, and I was writing for a very different audience than a professor."

Jane went to her first session at the Writing Center with her notecards for her research paper in hand. She had already begun writing a draft, but she wasn't satisfied with it. She asked the writing consultant, "Is there room in a research paper for my own opinion? When I read what I've written, I find it sterile." Jane explains, "I wasn't sure how to integrate my own point of view into the paper without saying 'I think' and 'I feel' in an awkward way. The consultant helped me learn how to state my own views as strong assertions and then back them up with explanations." Like Maria, Jane struggled with that grey area, where she was expected to include her own opinion and point of view in a research paper.

There were several specific areas that Jane was struggling with as a writer when she decided to seek assistance at the Writing Center. Her own description reveals just how self-aware she has become as a writer, for oftentimes, those who turn to the Writing Center for assistance have difficulty identifying precisely what it is they are struggling with. "I was trying to find my own voice. But I wasn't even sure what that meant at the time. I was trying to understand what 'academic style' was. And I was unsure about my audience. Who was I writing for? Was it my professor, alone? Was it for another audience? What could I assume as prior knowledge in my audience? How much background information was necessary or even appropriate?"

The writing consultant who worked with Jane was a graduate student in English, but she was younger than Jane. This age difference is understandably an issue for adult learners who would like to use the services of the Writing Center, but feel uncomfortable about working with someone who is quite a bit younger than themselves. Jane candidly admits, "I probably would not have gone to the Writing Center if I were going to be working with an undergraduate." Age difference is an issue that we cannot dismiss easily. How comfortable adult students feel about using the Writing Center certainly helps determine whether they will take advantage of its resources. Since the majority of our Writing Center consultants are graduate students in the English department, the setting is already a more comfortable one for adult students seeking assistance at the Center.

There was yet another reason why Jane felt comfortable about going to the Writing Center. At the beginning of that academic year, I had contacted the Director of the Writing Center, hoping that I could make a presentation to the consultants about the writing needs of returning adult students. This step proved to be an important one because it opened the door of communication between the Writing Center and one of the programs which served a non-traditional student population. At this presentation, I gave a profile of our adult learners as well as a profile of the kinds of writing they were asked to produce in the program's core curriculum. Jane said that knowing I had prepared the writing consultants to be aware of the special needs of adult learners made a difference in her decision about going to the Writing Center. She said she felt comfortable going there because I had made the first and all-important step in my presentation by "introducing" the consultants to this non-traditional student population. At this first presentation, I worked with the Director of the Writing Center to gather names of those who were genuinely interested in working with returning adult learners in our interdisciplinary program. This list, in turn, helped link Jane with a consultant who was enthusiastic about working with her. This step assured me that there would be a good "match" between our adult students and the Writing Center's services.

Creating discussion on writing issues among interdisciplinary aculty

My third example is somewhat different from the previous two. Liz is a retired computer systems engineer who had been away from the academic setting for thirty-two years when she decided to return to school. But similar to Maria and Jane, she too felt discouraged when faced with her first writing assignments. In her first graduate class, she was frustrated because she was required to do weekly journal writing, but had no idea what was expected of her. She felt that the "younger" students in the course had some familiarity with journal work, but since she had been away from school for such a long period, journal writing was totally foreign to her. With no guidelines, no samples to follow, and little feedback from the instructor on her preliminary journal work, she felt like giving up and quitting. But she stayed in the course, finally feeling more at ease as a writer when she found out she could use a topic she was

familiar with—computers—as the focus of her major paper. After the course was over, she made an appointment to see me to share her anxieties about the journal work in the course.

Her candid conversation with me was an important step because it allowed me to raise the issue of how journals were used in the classroom at a faculty meeting later in that academic year. The interdisciplinary faculty were very willing to discuss the role journal writing played in their courses and to share the kinds of directions or instructions they provided to their students. Because one faculty member had devised a very focused set of directions, with helpful questions to direct the students' energies, this became a helpful model for others to use. And I brought to their attention Liz's story of her frustration with journal work (keeping her identity anonymous). This, in turn, gave faculty a rare opportunity to consider what an assignment looks like to a returning adult student. Most important of all, it opened up some genuine dialogue among faculty of different disciplines and gave them a shared issue and some common ground to create a real exchange of classroom practices and pedagogy.

Conclusion

As we look ahead to the future, we can expect to see more and more adult learners reentering the academic setting. Teachers of writing need to be poised and ready to address the writing anxieties that non-traditional students bring to the classroom. Certainly the Writing Center will play an important role in addressing the needs of returning adults. We must be creative in devising additional ways of helping these older learners feel comfortable about academic writing, drawing upon their experience as writers in the workplace to build confidence. And we must continue to open paths for dialogue among faculty of all disciplines who face the challenge of guiding these non-traditional students to be effective communicators in the classroom.

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